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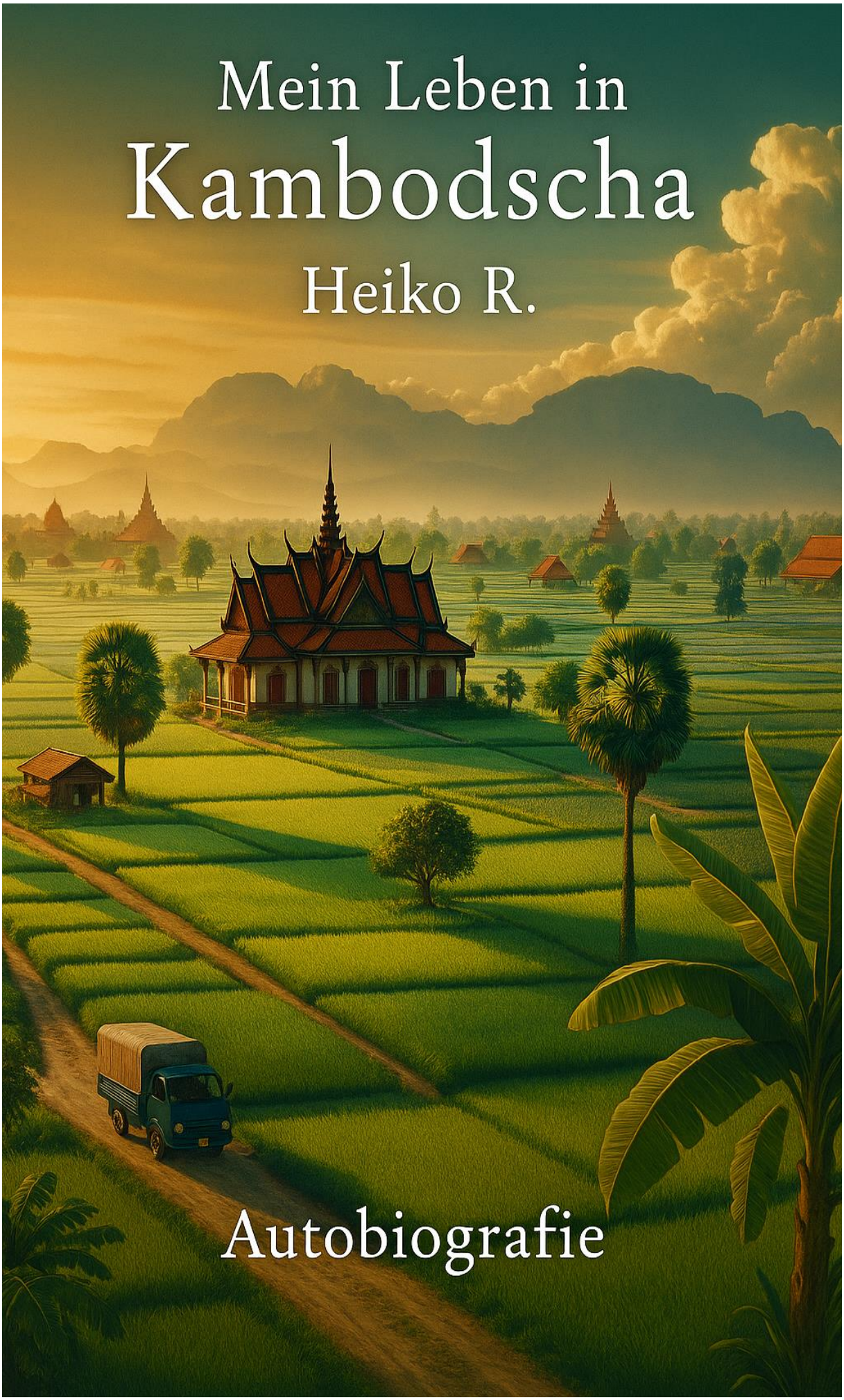

My life in Cambodia

Heiko R.

Foreword

When I first set foot on Cambodian soil in February 2007, I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams that this place would one day be more than just a fleeting destination for me. I never would have thought that this distant land in Southeast Asia would become my true home, an anchor for my soul.

My name is Heiko, and what you now hold in your hands is the honest and unvarnished story of my life in this fascinating country – a chronicle that tells of deep highs and painful lows, of unexpected twists of fate, business successes that I was proud to celebrate, and personal losses that weighed heavily on my heart.

Above all, it is a deeply personal account of my love for a country and its people who are so fundamentally different and yet so wonderfully enriching compared to my German homeland.

For whom I wrote this book

This book is aimed at anyone considering leaving their current life behind and daring to make a bold new start somewhere far away. Perhaps you're sitting at your desk right now, your thoughts wandering far away as you leaf through promising travel brochures or lose yourself in the endless web of the internet. Perhaps you're asking yourself the exciting question of what it would be like not just to travel, but to actually live, breathe, and thrive in another country.

I don't want to present you with unrealistic dreams, with rosy illusions of a life under palm trees without any downsides. Instead, I offer you an honest, unsparing insight into the complex reality of an expat life—with all its highlights and its unpleasant corners.

An honest travelogue for the curious

But even if you're not planning on packing your bags and moving away, but simply have a deep curiosity about what life in a country like Cambodia is really like - when you don't just stay as a tourist for a few carefree weeks, but settle there, put down roots, and become an integral part of society - then you've come to the right place.

I am not promising you a romanticized, glossy version of expat life, such as you might see in cheesy films, romanticized travelogues, or the idealized portrayals on social media.

Reality is often more complex, sometimes harder and rockier, than one could imagine in one's wildest imagination. But I can also assure you that life abroad often brings a level of fulfillment one could never have dreamed of within one's own four walls.

What to expect

This book isn't a traditional self-help book. It's a personal narrative—honest, unvarnished, sometimes painful, often touching, occasionally funny. It tells of the search for freedom, of arriving in a foreign culture, of the ups and downs of a life you can't plan. It tells of dreams that became reality and illusions that were shattered. And it tells of a person who, at some point, was no longer a guest in a country, but became a part of it.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of an Adventure – A Call from afar

It was in February 2007 when my feet first set foot on Cambodian soil. Originally, this trip wasn't intended to be a major, life-changing experience. I was on a purely pragmatic journey from Thailand to Cambodia, simply to extend my visa. Thailand was already familiar to me at that time; I had visited the country several times and had fallen deeply in love with its rich, vibrant culture, delicious, fragrant food, and warm, smiling people. Cambodia, on the other hand, was completely new to me, a blank spot on my personal map. I had heard a lot about the country's sad history and resilience, but had never experienced it firsthand.

My first destination was Sihanoukville, a small, still untouched coastal town picturesquely situated on the Gulf of Thailand. What was intended as a quick stop to take care of some bureaucratic necessities turned into an unexpected turning point in my life. I never would have guessed that this seemingly inconspicuous place would change my life so profoundly and irrevocably.

From the first moment I set foot on Cambodian soil, I felt a special, almost magical connection to this country. It was a feeling hard to put into words. It was as if Cambodia welcomed me with open arms, as if it had been waiting just for me.

Back then, Sihanoukville was far from the overcrowded tourist hotspot it would become in the years to come. The city had something original, authentic, and genuine that immediately captivated me. There were no huge hotel chains, no crowded beaches, no
Mass tourism. Instead, I found simple yet charming accommodations, cozy restaurants serving local cuisine, and a relaxed, almost timeless atmosphere that invited me to linger.

The beaches with their white sand stretching endlessly along the turquoise sea, the peaceful atmosphere in the city, and the friendliness of the locals – all of this stayed with me. From the very first moment, I felt comfortable and welcome, as if I had come home.

And then there was this feeling of freedom and unlimited possibilities. Unlike in heavily regulated Europe or tourist-driven Thailand, anything seemed possible here, if you just had the courage, the will, and the determination to tackle it. There were no rigid structures, no fixed rules. Here, you could make your dreams come true.

In this euphoria, driven by a thirst for adventure and a desire for a new beginning, I made a decision that would change my life forever: I rented a guesthouse that was still under construction. Its completion was scheduled for October.

Back in Italy, where I was living and working at the time, I quit my job. It wasn't an easy decision. I had worked in the international hotel industry for 13 years, made a name for myself, had a good salary, and a secure life. But all of that lost its meaning. The longing for a new life was stronger.

The six-month notice period gave me time to settle my affairs and prepare for this step. Those were intense months, marked by the pain of leaving, anticipation, and doubt.

In October 2007, just in time for the guesthouse's opening, I landed in Cambodia with two suitcases. I was ready for the adventure.

My hotel management studies and experience gave me the necessary knowledge and confidence. But I knew that a completely different kind of challenge awaited me in Cambodia.

Running a guesthouse in a developing country was something completely different than running a hotel in Europe.

The first few weeks in Sihanoukville were an intense learning experience. I had to deal with language barriers, understand local authorities, hire staff, and improvise a lot. Every day, I learned something new.

What helped me was my openness to the culture and my willingness to learn. I didn't impose my ideas on anyone, but rather sought a path that worked for both guests and employees.

This is how my life in Cambodia began – a courageous leap into the cold water, without a net, but with the firm will to swim.

Chapter 2: The first guesthouse – An oasis in the distance: The Max Guesthouse

In October 2007, the time had come: The Max Guesthouse opened its doors. After months of preparation, welcoming the first guests was an indescribable feeling. I was filled with a sense of pride and deep satisfaction.

The location was ideal: a small, quiet side street leading to one of Sihanoukville's most beautiful beaches. Not directly in the center, but close enough to everything important—and, above all, close to the sea.

The guesthouse was simple but clean and cozy. It offered everything travelers needed: comfortable beds, fans, private bathrooms, a small reception area, a common area, and a terrace for relaxing and chatting.

My idea was to create a piece of Germany in Cambodia – a place that not only offered accommodation, but also German breakfast and cuisine. At a time when Sihanoukville had hardly any hotels and almost everything was geared towards backpackers, this was a unique experience. It particularly appealed to German and Austrian tourists looking for something familiar.

The news spread quickly. "At Max's they serve cold beer, good music, and large portions" – word got around. Long-term vacationers, especially those looking to escape the cold of Europe, enjoyed dishes like roast pork or potato salad. It was a piece of home under palm trees.

Breakfast quickly became our signature dish. While others offered only toast and instant coffee, we served rolls from the German bakery, sausage, cheese, eggs, and homemade jam. Our guests loved it.

The work was intense. I was host, receptionist, cook, bartender, tour guide, and chaplain all rolled into one. The days began early with breakfast preparations and often ended late at the bar with conversations and stories from all over the world. It was exhausting, but fulfilling.

A major challenge was the staff. Most had no experience in the restaurant industry. There was no training, no standards. I had to teach everything – from hygiene to service behavior, even German recipes. It was often tedious, but also rewarding to see my employees learning and being proud of their progress.

A special moment was when my cook managed to prepare a roast pork with dumplings and red cabbage for the first time on her own. The guests were thrilled, she beamed with pride—and I knew her patience had paid off.

In addition to working at the guesthouse, I also had to deal with the authorities. Visas, business licenses, local regulations—much of it was opaque, often with additional "processing fees" that weren't official but were part of everyday life.

Despite all the challenges, my first year at Max Guesthouse was a time of learning and growth. More and more guests came, many stayed longer or returned. I became part of the community and felt at home—in a place that challenged and fulfilled me at the same time.

Chapter 3: The Dreams and the Beach Bar – A Lesson by the Sea

Driven by a romantic vision of life by the sea, I rented a small bar right on the beach. In my imagination, my daily routine would look like this: watching the sunrise in the morning with a cup of coffee, serving relaxed guests with coconuts and cocktails during the day, and enjoying the sunset with music in the evening.

The reality was different. For the first two weeks, I actually enjoyed every sunrise, the colors, the sound of the waves—it was magical. But I soon realized: This quiet beach life wasn't for me. I'm someone who's active, creative, and constantly seeking new challenges. The daily routine at the beach quickly became too monotonous for me.

Especially the evenings, when a colorful mix of dropouts, backpackers, and partygoers showed up, felt strange. It wasn't my world – loud music, lots of alcohol, superficial conversations. I felt like I didn't really fit in.

After just four weeks, I made a decision: I rented the bar to two young Englishmen. This allowed me to focus on what I was really passionate about—my guesthouse.

This experience taught me a lot. Not every dream is a good fit. Sometimes you have to admit that reality doesn't match your expectations. The important thing is to be honest with yourself and do what truly suits you.

Chapter 4: The Savory Hotel – My Step into the Next League

After almost two years at the Max Guesthouse, I reached a point where I felt: I wanted more. Not in the sense of wealth or luxury—but I wanted to work more professionally, more structured, perhaps even a bit more "grown-up." I had realized how much I valued organization, quality, and genuine hospitality. I wanted to explore how far I could implement this on a larger scale.

Through an acquaintance, I heard about a vacant hotel in downtown Sihanoukville. 18 rooms, a small pool, a neglected beer garden—the whole thing seemed uninviting at first glance. But I immediately saw the potential.

The location was unbeatable: within walking distance of the market, the bus station, and just ten minutes from the beach. Many travelers arrived here looking for accommodation. I knew that if I made this place my home again, it would work.

I negotiated with the owner and was awarded an initial one-year lease—with an option to extend. I knew it was risky. But I was determined.

The conversion

The first few days were a construction site. I had the roof sealed, painted, cleaned all the rooms, bought new mattresses, and sewn curtains. I remodeled the kitchen, hired new staff, and brought order to the chaos.

For the first three months, I barely slept. I spent the day taking care of tradespeople, guests, suppliers, and purchasing, and at night I sat at the reception desk or cooked for myself.

During this time, I learned more about Cambodian construction methods, broken pipes, termite infestations, and power outages than in my entire life before.

But I felt: This is mine. I'm building something here that bears my stamp.

The operation is running

When the hotel finally opened, guests quickly arrived. Word spread: "There's a German who makes a proper breakfast," "Everything's clean," "He takes care of everything."

I didn't just offer rooms—I offered orientation. I helped with onward travel, gave tips, and acted as a mediator between cultures. Sometimes I sat with the guests in the beer garden and told stories from my previous life in Europe—or simply listened when someone wanted to speak German in full sentences again after two months of traveling in India.

Once, a family from Austria came with three children. The mother was completely exhausted, the baby was crying, and their luggage was lost. I brought them water, toys from my box behind the reception desk, arranged diapers from a friend, and cooked something mild for the children in the evening. Two years later, they came back—especially for me.

A place with soul

The Savory Hotel was more than a hotel. It was a place where people could breathe. And it was my very own personal project. I loved the mix of structure and spontaneity, of planning and chaos. I was a hotelier, craftsman, pastor, chef, gardener, taxi driver, and storyteller—all rolled into one.

Chapter 5: Charlie – The Little King at the Savory Hotel

Charlie came to me while I was in the middle of renovating the Savory Hotel. I had discovered him in a small market on the outskirts of town, tied to a rope that was far too short, surrounded by noise, heat, and tourists with cell phone cameras. He was tiny, maybe a year old, a young macaque with light brown fur and alert, intelligent eyes. He looked at me—not pleadingly, not fearfully, but curiously. As if asking, "So? Do you want to take me with you or not?"

I knew at that moment: This little guy belongs to me.

A new life

Charlie quickly adjusted to his new home—perhaps even faster than I did. At the Savory Hotel, he got his own little corner on the terrace, a bamboo platform with ropes and old sofa cushions, but of course, he never stayed there for long. He much preferred sitting on the reception desk, right next to the telephone, watching guests check in. He immediately understood who was friendly—and who wasn't. If someone got loud, he moved away. If someone laughed, he came closer.

At first, I was still cautious. I didn't know his moods, I didn't know how he would react to strangers. But Charlie, quite contrary to my expectations, was charming, sociable, and sensitive. He knew exactly when it was best to disappear—and when to step onto the stage.

A star you can touch

The guests loved him. Children and older travelers, especially those with grandchildren of their own, often sat on the terrace for long periods and threw him peanuts or pieces of fruit. Charlie could drink through a straw, play with sunglasses, and tap his tail on the table when he got impatient. He loved bananas—but only ripe ones, never green ones. And he hated being treated like a baby.

Once, in the middle of the day, he lay down in the freshly made bed in Room 3, stretched out on all fours, and simply fell asleep. When the French tourist entered the room, she first screamed in shock—then burst out laughing. She took a photo, sent it to her family, and left Charlie there until the evening. "He looks more tired than I am," she said, later bringing him a piece of mango.

Charlie on tour

His greatest passion was riding his motorcycle. As soon as I started my little scooter, he jumped onto the seat, clung to my back, and squealed with excitement. I even got him a little helmet—not because he liked it, but because the guests thought it was hilarious.

We went to the market together in the morning. While I negotiated with the vendors, Charlie sat on the luggage rack with a banana and watched the hustle and bustle. Sometimes he stole fruit from small children's hands—but always so skillfully that they laughed themselves.

He was the secret mayor of Sihanoukville.

Not always easy

Charlie was a true family member—but not always an easy roommate. He had his days. When he got jealous, he would tear napkins to pieces or steal lighters. Sometimes he would bite shoes or hidden house keys. Once, he climbed onto the roof and disappeared for two days. I looked for him everywhere.
– and finally found him asleep in the storeroom, snuggled between towels and a packet of biscuits that he had half-eaten.

He knew I was angry—and put on his most innocent face.
I could never stay mad at him for long.

More than an animal

Charlie was more than just a monkey. He was a comforter, an icebreaker, and a one-man entertainer. When guests had arguments, he simply intervened. When I was tired, he lay quietly next to me. When I was frustrated, he made me laugh again with his clowning.

He was part of my everyday life—and part of my identity as a host. Everyone who visited the Savory Hotel remembered him. There was hardly a guest book that didn't contain at least one entry saying "Greetings to Charlie!" Some guests sent postcards months later—not to me, but to him.

A silent teacher

Sometimes I thought: Maybe he taught me more than I taught him. Patience. Spontaneity. Curiosity. And above all: that you often reach people not with words, but with attitude.

When I looked at him, I didn't just see an animal—I saw a little spirit who, in his own way, understood what life meant: observing, staying curious, being connected.

Chapter 6: A Pile of Broken Glass – The Resignation and the Bitter Farewell to Savory

The best stories often start with a bang – this one ended with one.

It was a sweltering day in March. I was sitting in the shady courtyard with a regular from Hamburg, drinking coffee, Charlie dozing on the small ledge, when a messenger delivered an official letter. Yellow paper, red stamp. I knew at first glance: This wasn't good.

The lease would not be renewed. No reason given. No discussion. No thank you. Simply: It was over in 30 days.

A hard blow

I can still remember exactly how I felt. Not anger. Not panic. Just a dull, physically palpable emptiness. I had built this hotel with my own hands—everything was thought out, furnished with love, filled with memories. And suddenly, the foundation was pulled out from under my feet.

The owner had seen how well Savory was doing. Bookings were increasing every month, reviews were excellent, and the restaurant was filling up. And she apparently wanted to take it all over herself. Or lease it out at a higher price. Or something else.
– whatever. I was out.

And all this without any right of appeal. No tenant protection, no German bureaucracy. Only the law of the strongest – or the greedy.

The last 30 days

I was never one to rant loudly or slam doors. But inside, I was angry. Disappointed. And sad. I walked through every room, touched the furniture, looked into the faces of my employees who didn't know if they could continue working for me. Charlie sensed something was wrong. He was especially quiet during those days. He often lay on my desk and just watched me pack.

I politely canceled my guests' reservations, organized refunds, contacted other hotels, and referred regular customers. And I tried to maintain my composure—like a captain abandoning his ship but not sinking.

A farewell with tears

On my last evening, I hosted a small farewell party in the courtyard. I cooked everything myself: goulash with dumplings, a potato salad like my mother's, and draft beer. Many guests came: former employees, acquaintances, even some neighbors I didn't know very well.

We laughed. We drank. And at some point, we sang. Charlie sat on the bar like a little king, with a red silk scarf around his neck, a gift from a regular customer from Thailand.

I gave a short speech. No big show. Just a few sentences:

"Thank you for being there. Thank you for letting me experience this. I don't know what's next—but it's next. And I'm going to build something again."

What remains

The following night, I walked alone through the empty hotel. There were no guests, no lights, no sounds. I heard only the hum of the fans and, somewhere outside, the rattling of an old moped.

I took a piece of chalk and wrote on the wall in the staff room:

"Here, someone once believed that you could create a home with heart. And he was right."

Then I closed the door. Forever.

Chapter 7: Max & Moritz – The Reboot with Crocodiles

After the bitter farewell to the Savory Hotel, I was empty.

I had lost everything: room, kitchen, guests – and also a piece of myself.

But as so often in my life, things turned out completely differently than planned.

I drove through Sihanoukville with Charlie in tow, looking for a new place, a new idea. The city was changing—more construction sites, more Chinese people, more unrest. I wanted to get out. More nature, more peace, less stress. Somewhere where I could build something of my own again.

And then I found it: an old property just outside the city. Two simple bungalows, a large garden, a small stream behind it. Nothing special. But I immediately saw: Something could grow here.

Two new names

I named the two houses "Max" and "Moritz" – like the rascals from Wilhelm Busch's picture story. A small homage to my childhood. And maybe also a little to myself, because, quite honestly, I was never a good boy. Always on the go, always with ideas in my head, always a little against the grain.

Max and Moritz were simple but charming. Wooden floors, fans, mosquito nets. I gradually expanded them – set up an outdoor kitchen, planted herbs in the garden, and had a small pond built. And then they came: the crocodiles.

A real eye-catcher

A friend from the village brought them with him: two small, but real crocodiles, about a meter long. "You can put them in the pond," he said. "They'll eat insects. And you'll get more guests." At first, I thought it was a joke – but then I thought: Why not?

I had the pond secured, built a low fence around it, and released the two. The reactions were immediate. Some were fascinated. Others were frightened. And still others didn't believe the animals were real.

A bite that made headlines

One of these doubters was an Austrian guest who had arrived with his wife. On the second day of his stay, he stood in front of the pond, arms crossed, sunglasses on his forehead. "They're not real," he said. "They're made of stone. Such a tourist attraction."

I smiled and just said, “Better not go too close.”

But he went anyway. He crouched down in front of the fence, stretched his hand over the water, and snapped his fingers. And then it happened: a snap, a scream, a bloody finger.

Not a serious bite—but enough to remind him of bandages and salt water for the rest of the vacation. His wife scolded him, I brought disinfectant, and Charlie sat on the roof and watched the scene like a judge with a judgmental gaze.

The Austrian later said with a laugh: "Okay, now I believe it. They're real."

A place to breathe

Despite – or perhaps because of – the crocodiles, Max & Moritz was a minor success. Not a hotel, not an inn—more of a mix of guesthouse, retreat, and curiosity. Many came for the animals. Others because they knew me. And some simply because they were looking for peace and quiet.

I took care of everything. Cooking, laundry, repairs, and conversations with guests. I sat on the veranda in the evenings, drinking tea, Charlie beside me, the frogs croaking in the pond, the crocodiles lying motionless in the moonlight. It was peaceful—in my own, strange way.

Max & Moritz was doing well. I had my small team, two rooms, a charming open kitchen, two real crocodiles in the pond, Charlie as my animal receptionist—and new, curious guests every month. Some came just for the crocodiles, others stayed for the peace and quiet. I felt like a host again—the way I loved it.

But as is so often the case in Cambodia, the happiness did not last.

One day, a young man came by with his Cambodian girlfriend. He was from England, had run a small café in Phnom Penh, and was looking for a fresh start. We started talking, first about mangos, then about guesthouses, then about Max & Moritz. And after three days, he said: "I'll take it. As it is. With everything."

I knew I wouldn't stay forever. I didn't own the property; I was only renting it. And somehow it felt good to let go before someone else took over my life again.

So I sold him the business. The name, the client base, the bookings, the inventory. Charlie stayed there. The crocodiles stayed too. I left with a lump in my throat – but with the feeling that it was the right thing to do. I left behind a functioning little paradise.

Chapter 8: The new beginning in Kampot

After I handed over the Max & Moritz business, it became clear to me: I didn't want to rent again, I didn't want to be dependent on others again. I wanted something of my own. A friend told me about a piece of land near Kampot—not just any piece of land, but a very large piece of land, a little out of the way, with lots of greenery and distance from the neighbors. Exactly what I was looking for.

I went there, looked at it – and knew immediately: This will be my place.

No noise, no hustle and bustle, no tourists in sight. Just rice fields, palm trees, sunshine, and a sweeping view of the mountains. It wasn't a strategic location for a business, but it was exactly what I wanted for myself.

I bought the property – no more lease, no interim solutions.

This time it really belonged to me.

Construction phase from a distance

Since I was living in Sihanoukville at the time, I couldn't be on the construction site every day. But I carefully organized everything: materials, workers, and site managers. I made regular phone calls, had photos and videos sent to me, and planned each phase as best I could from a distance.

It wasn't easy giving instructions to a Cambodian construction crew while I wasn't there myself – but I was determined. And I knew I could trust them. The people I was working with were reliable. Not perfect, but honest.

While living in Sihanoukville, I regularly traveled to Kampot to check on the construction progress. It was always a special moment when something new was finished—the foundation slab poured, the first walls erected, the roof trusses erected.

Every time I saw: This will be my home.

Arriving on your own soil

When the house was finally completed, I returned to Kampot permanently. I stood on my own expansive property and immediately sensed: This was the beginning of something bigger. I hadn't chosen the land by chance. The size was deliberate, with the idea of perhaps building more later: a guesthouse, a small pavilion, a studio—I kept all options open.

The house itself was not simple, but luxurious, with all the comforts I could afford.

Large windows overlooking the greenery, a modern kitchen, air-conditioned rooms, and a bathroom with hot water, which was by no means a given in Cambodia.

I deserved this comfort – after all the years in the hotel business, after all the change and turmoil.

The terrace was my favorite spot. I had it built with a roof, a comfortable seating area, and a ceiling fan. From here, I could watch the sunrise while sipping an espresso in the morning and listen to the sounds of nature in the evening.

Kampot – a place of opportunities

Life in Kampot had a different pace than in Sihanoukville or Phnom Penh. It was quieter, but not boring. I made my first acquaintances with the neighbors – simple farmers, fishermen, traders. Friendly, discreet, curious.

I took my time getting to know the area. I rode my scooter into town, bought furniture, visited markets, and tried new restaurants. It was a pleasant feeling to grow into a new role—not as a restaurateur, not as a tourist, but as part of this landscape.

As the house continued to be furnished—with high-quality materials, carefully selected furniture, and small details that were important to me—I was already thinking about the next steps. Maybe a second building, maybe a pool. I kept all options open.

It was my project.

And for the first time in my life I had the feeling: Now I set the framework myself.

It wasn't until after the move that I realized what new challenges awaited me in this rural setting. Kampot was not only quieter, but also more secluded, more authentic—a place where time passed more slowly.

The first challenge was the internet. None of the established companies wanted to install a line to our house, which was three kilometers outside of town, the only house in the area, surrounded by rice fields, mango trees, and peacefully grazing cows. For us, this meant complete digital isolation.

In an age where communication and work are almost impossible without the internet, this was a real problem. I remember long conversations with various providers, all of whom had the same excuse: too far, too expensive, no interest.

Luckily, there was a new internet company just entering the market. I managed to convince the seller that many more houses would soon be built in the area and it would be advantageous for him to be the first to arrive. I promised him I would refer potential customers to the neighborhood—even though at that point, there were no neighbors other than us. The catch: I had to pay $300 a month for internet—a small fortune in Cambodia, but essential for my connection to the outside world. I saw it as an investment in our future.

Life in the countryside held even more surprises. During the rainy season, the access roads turned into
Mud roads where you could get stuck in your car. I remember one night when we were returning from a restaurant and the car got stuck in the middle of a huge puddle – all around us was darkness and the croaking of frogs. During the dry season, however, a fine layer of dust settled over everything, and you could barely ventilate without the wind blowing red dirt into the house. Nevertheless, we got used to these extremes, and eventually they simply became part of our everyday lives.

But all these inconveniences were far outweighed by the incomparable beauty of the place, the deep peace that surrounded us, and the feeling of freedom that one can only experience in such a place. Waking up every morning and seeing the

Watching the sunrise over the seemingly endless rice fields was a privilege worth forgoing some modern amenities for. The nights were silent, accompanied only by the chirping of crickets and the distant barking of a dog. And when it rained, it was as if the world held its breath for a moment.

Chapter 9: Build, sell, start again – my entry into the real estate business

After we sold the guesthouse in Sihanoukville and moved into our new home in Kampot, I never would have imagined that a new business idea would come to me so soon. It all started innocently enough: A friend from Europe visited us in January 2013. He was enthusiastic about the surroundings, the expansive view over the rice fields, and, of course, the house I had built with great effort and attention to detail.

“Heiko,” he said over breakfast in the open air, “if you could build me a house like this, I would move here immediately.”

At first, I thought it was just a spontaneous idea. But that evening, we talked about it again – and the idea became a plan. I still owned a large piece of land that I had bought shortly after we moved – with the idea of perhaps building something bigger there someday. That conversation got everything rolling. Why shouldn't I do just that? Buy land, build beautiful houses, and sell them to people who also wanted to realize their dream of living in Cambodia?

The beginning was simple – yet full of risk

My first project began with a lot of uncertainty. While I had experience building our own house, building a house for someone with precise ideas, high expectations, and a different cultural understanding of "quality" was a new challenge. I quickly learned that things are done differently in Cambodia: There were no clear building standards, no reliable quality standards, and barely any effective inspections. Everything I had built, I had to inspect, correct, and adjust myself on site every day. That meant getting up early, negotiating with the workers, often mediating, exchanging materials, and carefully inspecting each individual wall.

And yet, I had incredible fun. I felt like I was building something here—in the truest sense of the word.

One house after another – like in a frenzy

My friend's house was a complete success. Even before it was completely finished, neighbors, acquaintances, and other expats came to express interest. They asked questions, wanted to know prices, and requested viewings. And suddenly, I was in the thick of the deal. I sold the second lot, built the next house. Then another. Again and again.

In the end, I built a total of eleven houses in just a few years—each one a little better than the last. I learned from each project, improved the floor plans, experimented with local and imported materials, and adapted to the buyers' wishes. I developed a feel for what European expats were looking for: a touch of luxury, yet immersed in nature, with plenty of peace and quiet, a large plot of land, and solid construction.

My clients – a mix of dreamers and realists

Many of my clients came from Europe, often German, Swiss, and French. Some wanted a retirement home, others simply wanted to escape the rat race of the West. They were looking for a life in the sun, a simpler existence – with less bureaucracy, less noise, less stress.

For them, I wasn't just their client. I was their advisor, interpreter, negotiator with the authorities, mediator for their electricity connection, helper with the import of their furniture—sometimes even a pastor. I lived in a world where everything was possible at once: investor, architect, construction manager, pastor, and emigrant all rolled into one.

Challenges – legal, practical, human

Of course, not everything was easy. In Cambodia, foreigners are not officially allowed to own land. I had to rely on Cambodian partners I trusted, which was no small feat when dealing with six-figure sums. Every contract, every signature entailed a risk.

Furthermore, the market was unregulated. There were no building permits in the European sense, and no reliable jurisprudence. Everything was based on relationships, contacts, and trust. If you didn't have a strong local network, you could quickly run into trouble.

And yet – it worked.

A successful chapter of my life

By the end, I had not only sold eleven houses, but also made many friends. I had built a new business, almost from scratch. I had developed into a role that suited me: creative, practical, flexible.

And I had created something that I am still proud of today: little oases for people who wanted to start their lives anew – just like I did back then.

Chapter 10: The birth of my daughter Laura – Being a father in Cambodia

On September 8, 2013, my life changed forever. My daughter Laura was born in a small hospital in Kampot – an event that overshadowed all previous experiences, successes, and setbacks. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had prepared me for this moment.

I still remember that morning clearly. The sun was already high as we drove to the hospital, but I barely noticed anything around me. The streets, the rice fields, the honking of the mopeds. Everything was as if through a veil. My heart was pounding in my throat. I was excited, nervous, full of hope and fear all at once. And then, suddenly, this tiny being was in my arms. Warm, soft, completely helpless – and yet with a presence that silenced everything around me.

A moment that changed everything

I held Laura in my arms for the first time and knew: This is the most important thing in my life. From now on, I'm a father. It was as if someone had flipped a switch. The moment she looked at me with those dark, curious eyes, I no longer had any doubts: I would do anything for this child.

The feeling of holding a small life in your hands, for which you are now responsible, is indescribable. No matter how many self-help books you read or how many clever thoughts you have, when that time comes, everything is different. And everything is more real.

A new life in a new country

Starting a family in a foreign country brings special joys – but also special challenges. While there was a hospital in Kampot, the medical care was, of course, not comparable to European standards. I had met the doctors beforehand, asked questions, and gathered information – but ultimately, it was a leap into the deep end.

Nevertheless, everything had gone well. Laura was healthy, her mother was well, and I was overwhelmed. I could hardly sleep that night; there were too many thoughts, too many emotions. I kept getting up, going to her crib, watching her sleep. Everything seemed suddenly fragile and yet so incredibly strong.

Authorities, embassies, bureaucracy

After the initial euphoria, the paperwork began. The birth had to be registered, a German passport had to be applied for,
Citizenship had to be clarified. This meant: many forms, long waiting times, trips to the German embassy in Phnom Penh, conversations with Cambodians and Germans, and often misunderstandings.

It was arduous, sometimes nerve-wracking. But it was worth it. I wanted my daughter to be able to embrace both worlds: the European and the Cambodian. I wanted her to be welcome everywhere – with a passport that opened doors for her and a childhood that gave her roots.

A new sense of responsibility

With the birth of Laura, everything changed. My previous life as a host, building contractor, and doer – that faded into the background. Suddenly, it wasn't just about projects, plans, or income. It was about security, proximity, and stability. I didn't want to constantly be running around construction sites or arguing with clients about square meter prices. I wanted to be there. Be a good father.

I slowed down and restructured my life. I learned that success isn't measured solely in money or praise, but also in the ability to be there for a child—with time, love, and patience.

A child between two worlds

Laura grew up in a cultural melting pot. Cambodians, French, Germans, and Swiss people lived in our neighborhood. She heard different languages, saw different customs, and moved effortlessly between Khmer, German, and English. It was fascinating to watch her.

She was curious, smart, cheerful—and sometimes very determined. Even at the age of three, she insisted on negotiating at the market herself, in Khmer, of course. And she did it with a confidence that made everyone smile.

Fatherhood as a new chapter

Suddenly, I was no longer just a builder or a host—I was a dad. And that was more than any role before. I learned how to change diapers, cook porridge, and find pacifiers half asleep at night. I learned to appreciate little things—the first smile, the first steps, the first words.

With Laura, a new era in my life began. A calmer, deeper, perhaps even more meaningful one. I had arrived. Not just in Cambodia—but in my own life.

Chapter 12: The Resort – Between Palm Trees and Plans

After eleven house building projects, countless site visits, and endless viewings with prospective buyers, I felt a growing fatigue. Not physically—I was used to that—but internally. The enthusiasm with which I once sorted bricks, measured walls, or inspected new properties slowly gave way to a certain routine. I had accomplished a lot, but I was missing something crucial: direct contact with people.

I remembered my time in Sihanoukville, the guests' laughter, the conversations at breakfast, the clinking of glasses in the evening. For me, being a host was never just a job—it was a way of life. A constant giving, listening, and mediating. I felt that was exactly what I wanted to do again: create a place where people feel comfortable, where they feel at home, and want to stay.

The idea of opening a small resort slowly matured. Not a large hotel, not mass tourism—just an oasis of tranquility. I envisioned seven spacious bungalows nestled in a tropical garden with palm trees, frangipani trees, and butterflies. In the center, an elegant swimming pool, glistening in the sunlight, with loungers and shady spots. A small restaurant with an open kitchen where I could pamper my guests with German home cooking and Cambodian specialties.

I purchased another plot of land, this time with extra care. I wanted the location to be ideal—not too far from the center of Kampot, but secluded enough to offer complete peace and quiet. The view of the surrounding hills, the birdsong in the morning, the chirping of crickets at night—I wanted all of this to be part of the experience.

Construction took several months. I was back on the job every day —organizing, monitoring, and decorating. I was inspired by boutique resorts in Thailand, but always stuck to my own style: simple, high-quality, with lots of wood, warm colors, and natural materials.

The opening was a quiet but emotional moment. No big ceremony—just me, a few friends, and the first guests. Some were old acquaintances from Sihanoukville, others had heard about my new place through word of mouth. They came, stayed,
– and came back.

It was a wonderful time. I started cooking again – every day. Fresh rolls in the morning, fried potatoes, beef goulash, apple strudel. My guests appreciated finding a taste of European comfort in the middle of Asia. And I enjoyed hearing their stories – about world travels, emigration plans, failed marriages, or big dreams.

The pool became the center of the resort. Not just for swimming – also for talking, laughing, and being silent. I met so many interesting people. A writer from Canada who started his next book with me. A couple from Denmark who fell in love with Kampot and stayed. A retired teacher from Bavaria who recounted his experiences in Africa over a beer that evening.

I felt like I had arrived. The resort was doing well, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The bungalows were almost always fully booked—many guests stayed longer than planned. Some came back every year, some even twice a year. A kind of small community of returning guests, new acquaintances, and friends emerged.

It was the first time in a long time that I thought: Maybe I've found it now—that balance between work, passion, and quality of life. I worked a lot, yes, but it felt easy. I was fulfilled, not exhausted.

And then, in the midst of this new chapter, something wonderful happened: I learned that I was going to be a father again.

Chapter 13: Our Second Daughter – Joy and Sorrow

In May 2016, our second daughter was born. We were so excited for her. After all the career upheavals, the move, the new beginning with the resort, this child was a symbol of new life, hope, and the future. Laune was now almost three years old and eagerly awaiting her little sister. She talked constantly about how she would show her everything: the garden, the pool, the cats, the dragonflies on the water lily pad.

The birth went smoothly. We chose the small clinic in Kampot again, where we'd already had positive experiences. Everything was simple but humane. The midwife was friendly, the atmosphere calm. When I saw the tiny creature for the first time, so peaceful, so perfect, I could hardly believe that life had given us such a gift again.

We named her Alina—a name that symbolizes light and tenderness. And that's exactly what she was. From day one, she radiated a calming quality. She hardly cried, drank well, and slept deeply. When I walked through the house at night with her in my arms, while the rain drummed on the tin roof outside, I felt as if time stood still.

Laura was also captivated. She helped with diapers, sang songs, and told stories in a mix of German, Khmer, and imaginary words. Sometimes the three of us would sit outside on the terrace in the early evening. One of us would sit on my lap, the other on the blanket. The chirping of crickets, a warm breeze, the sun slowly sinking behind the palm trees. It was like a little paradise.

But this paradise was fragile.

Six months after Alina's birth, the unimaginable happened. One morning, she didn't wake up.

I barely remember that day—just fragments. The incredulous stare at her face. The emergency call, the doctor who came, nothing more could be done. The shock. The silence. That bottomless emptiness that spread, as if someone had stopped the world and turned off all life.

It was sudden infant death syndrome. A term you read about in articles beforehand, but it happens to others – never to you. And yet it was our reality. Our daughter was gone. Just like that. Without warning, without illness, without reason.

The following weeks blurred into a fog of pain, tears, and endless questions. Why them? Why us? Could we have noticed something? Should we have done something differently? There was no answer. Just this hole in my chest that wouldn't stop hurting.

My partner was crushed by this loss. She withdrew more and more. At first, she barely spoke, then she started drinking. At first, only in the evenings. Then during the day as well. I tried everything—talking, offering help, patience. But she was no longer available. Not for me. Not for Laura.

The house, once full of life, became silent. I tried to be strong—for my daughter, for the guests, for the business. But inside, I was often at my limit. I lay awake at night, the emptiness beside me. The screams, the tears, the memory of that tiny face—they wouldn't leave me alone.

After many months, after a desperate attempt to save what could no longer be saved, we made a decision. A difficult, sad, but necessary decision: We separated.

Laura stayed with me. That was important to both of us. She was my support – and I was hers. I wanted to give her stability, a framework, a daily routine. Even though my inner self was often anything but stable.

I lost a lot during this time—emotionally, but also financially. Around $300,000 disappeared in the turmoil of the separation, legal battles, and dissolutions. My former safety net became thin. But I didn't lose my dignity. I didn't lose my love for my daughter. I didn't lose my will to live.

There were days when I didn't know how I would manage it all. But I managed. Because I had to. Because a little girl looked at me every morning with wide eyes and needed me. And because somewhere inside me there was still hope. Hope that out of all this pain, something good would one day come.

Chapter 14: Diagnosis and Change – My Life with Parkinson’s

After I had just stabilized myself emotionally and mastered everyday life with Laura alone, life was about to present me with another challenge – this time one that concerned my body.

It started gradually. At first, there was just a tremor in my right hand, and occasional numbness in my fingers, which I attributed to overwork. But the symptoms worsened: my movements slowed, simple movements became increasingly difficult, and my right shoulder regularly hurt. At first, I blamed it all on stress and age, but deep down, I felt something was wrong.

In 2019, after many doctor visits, the diagnosis finally came: Parkinson's. I sat alone in a cool consulting room while the doctor calmly explained the results to me. It was a moment where time seemed to stand still. Although I knew that Parkinson's is treatable but not curable, it felt like a judgment. My first thought was, "What will happen to Laura now?"

The months that followed were difficult. I was forced to slow down my life, which was anything but easy. My body increasingly made me aware of limits I'd never known before. Suddenly, every step, every movement, every decision required more energy and planning.

Long before that, I had been teaching German alongside my other jobs – sometimes spontaneously for friends, sometimes for guests or acquaintances who wanted to learn German for professional reasons. It was a passion that had never left me. But now it became a real prospect.

In my current physical condition, I could no longer manage my resort, which had brought me joy and success for years. I made the decision to sell it – with a heavy heart, but knowing it was time to start a new chapter. The daily demands, the constant presence, the management – all of it was no longer manageable.

I thought about it for a long time. What could I do that was both meaningful and physically feasible—something that gave me joy and was still compatible with my health? The answer was actually obvious: teaching. I had always loved teaching others my language, and my heart was in it.

The digital world offered new opportunities. I began to familiarize myself with online platforms, created a profile, and took on my first students.
– initially hesitantly, then with growing confidence. It was a completely different world from the hospitality industry. No reception, no linen changes, no construction work, or guests with special requests – just people from all over the world who wanted to learn my language. I sat at my desk in Kampot, overlooking the palm trees, while teaching students in Italy, Ukraine, or Japan.

What particularly touched me was the closeness that developed despite this. I witnessed how students made progress, how they told me about their everyday lives, about exams, job interviews, or family visits in Germany. I became not only their teacher, but often also their listener, advisor, and companion.

Parkinson's continues to accompany me every day. But I've learned to live with it – and make the best of it. Some days are better, others worse. But today I know more than ever: You don't have to give up when life changes. You have to reinvent yourself – with courage, patience, and a little imagination.

Chapter 15: Restarting as an Online Teacher – A Life Between Screen and Family

After selling the resort, a new chapter begins for me. My time as a hotelier and property developer is over – too physically demanding, mentally draining, and no longer compatible with my illness. Fortunately, I've never completely stopped teaching German over the years. Even during my time as an innkeeper, property developer, and resort owner, I've repeatedly introduced people from all over the world to the German language – tourists, friends, and acquaintances. It's something that comes easily to me, brings me joy, and makes me feel needed.

Today, I've turned this passion into my profession. I teach on one of the world's largest online platforms. Transitioning to this new world of work is initially unfamiliar—instead of chatting with guests over breakfast or discussing construction plans, I now sit in front of my laptop with a headset on.

I explain grammar, practice pronunciation, and help people realize their dreams: be it being recognized as a doctor in Germany, studying, getting a new job, or simply wanting to communicate in a new country.

My students come from all over the world—Brazil, Spain, Japan, Russia, Turkey, and the USA. I accompany doctors, nurses, spouses, students, and expatriates on their journeys. Every encounter is unique, and every story touches me in its own way. This work is not only fulfilling, it also gives me new perspectives and experiences every day.

Back home in Kampot, my daily routine has stabilized. My daughter, Laura, goes to school, speaks fluent German, English, and Khmer, and is growing up in a culturally diverse environment. She is curious, sensitive, and strong—and I am incredibly proud of her. Our little dog, Karli, brings joy to our lives every day. He is Laura's best friend and my loyal companion, especially on difficult days.

Our lives have become quieter – but not less Meaningful. I teach because I love it. I live consciously, savor the little moments, am there for my daughter—and find meaning in what I do every day.

Chapter 16: Life with Laura – Everyday Life, School and Little Miracles

Laura is eleven years old. She attends an international school in Kampot, is learning three languages with ease—German, English, and Khmer—and has developed into a remarkably open, self-confident girl. She reflects not only my past but also my hopes for the future.

Our days are clearly structured. In the morning, I take Laura to school, then I start my lessons. I work from home – that makes things a lot easier, especially with my illness. In the afternoon, when Laura is back, we eat together, talk about her day, and laugh a lot. Sometimes we study together, sometimes we look at old photos or listen to music. It's these small, quiet moments that shape our everyday lives – full of closeness, love, and intimacy.

Although my illness limits our options, Laura handles it with amazing maturity. She understands that I can't do everything with her—no long walks, no bike rides, no trips like before. Instead, we have our own rituals: We play board games, do small creative projects, or she helps me prepare my lessons. Often, she just sits next to me and paints while I teach. Her mere presence does me good.

Kampot has become a true home for her. She knows the people in our neighborhood, knows where to get the best mangoes, and feels safe and secure. She loves animals, especially Karli, our little dog, who accompanies her to the door every morning and happily greets her again in the afternoon.

Of course, there are also difficult days. Sometimes she asks me why we can't live like other families—with outings, vacations, and sporting activities. Then I explain to her as best I can what Parkinson's means and why our lives are different. But I also emphasize how strong she is and how special our relationship is. She knows she can always count on me—and I can count on her.

Laura brings light into my life. Through her, I learn to see what's essential: the warmth of a hug, the power of a smile, the importance of love and presence. She is my greatest motivation, my comfort in dark times, my pride and joy.

Our life together in Kampot is quiet, sometimes challenging, but rich in meaning. And when I look at Laura—how she grows, learns, laughs, and looks clearly to the future—I know that despite all the blows of fate, I have done many things right.

Chapter 17: Review and Outlook – My Life in Cambodia

When I look back on my life in Cambodia today, I see a mosaic of decisions, coincidences, successes, losses, and new beginnings. What once began with curiosity and a plane ticket became a journey that shaped me like no other.

I've built a lot: guesthouses, houses, a resort—but I've also left a lot behind. I've learned that possessions and success aren't what define a person. It's the relationships we have, the challenges we accept, and the love we give.

Today, I live a modest but fulfilling life. My work as a German teacher brings me joy and makes me feel needed. I teach not because I have to, but because I want to. It's my way of staying connected—with the world and with myself.

Cambodia has become my home. I love the sounds of nature, the slow pace, the warmth of the people. I know I won't be here forever, but I also know I wouldn't rather be anywhere else.

Laura is my center. She gives my life direction, stability, and depth. When I see her growing up—with curiosity, courage, and an open heart—it fills me with deep peace.

At the same time, there's a fear that never completely leaves me: the worry that I might not live long enough for her to no longer need me. I'm battling not only Parkinson's, but also severe diabetes—two diseases that leave their mark. I try to make every day count. For her. For us.

Perhaps that's the most important lesson this country, this life, this time has taught me: Life can't be planned – but it's worth living. Every day anew. With all its ups and downs.

I've arrived. Not because everything is perfect, but because I've learned to recognize the essence in imperfection.

Finally: Tips for anyone thinking about emigrating

After all these years in Cambodia and all the ups and downs I've experienced, I'd like to end by sharing some personal tips – not as an all-knowing person, but as someone who has truly lived it.

1. Dreams are important – but preparation is everything.

A life abroad doesn't begin with a plane ticket, but with honest planning. Research, learn the language, and inform yourself about laws, visa requirements, and the cost of living. Spontaneity is good, but not when your existence is at stake.

2. Romance and reality belong together.

Many expats dream of living under palm trees. But paradise often also brings mosquitoes, bureaucracy, and unexpected challenges. Be prepared to respond to both with patience and pragmatism: the magic and the effort.

3. Respect the culture – you are a guest.

Get to know people, listen, and don't judge too quickly. What may seem strange or "illogical" to you often makes sense in a different context. Humility and openness will help you truly connect.

4. Finance yourself realistically.

A "new life" isn't a vacation. You need a stable income, ideally also reserves for difficult times. Many fail not because of the country, but because of the money issue. Don't kid yourself – and plan wisely.

5. Take care of your health.

Being ill abroad is one of the toughest experiences you can have. Pay attention to preventative care, nutrition, and exercise early on. If you have pre-existing conditions, find out about medical care available locally—this is also important for your mental health.

6. Build a real network.

Friends, neighbors, like-minded people – at some point they will be more important than any landmark. Especially in difficult times, we see how valuable a community is.

7. Don't do it to run away from something – do it to get somewhere else.

Escape is never a good motivation. Those who avoid their problems often find them in their luggage. Go because you really want to.
– not because you have to.

8. And finally: Enjoy it.

Life is short. If you have the courage to take new paths, then you deserve to see, feel, and celebrate the beauty. Even when things get difficult, don't forget why you set out on this journey.